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**MUSIC**

## Rosanne Cash Turns Her Sorrow Into Music


By **JIM FUSILLI**  
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Rosanne Cash is caught between thoughts of what's ahead and the pain of what's not quite behind her. Soon, the 50-year-old singer-songwriter will be a grandmother for the first time, and she and her husband, musician and producer John Leventhal, are happily busy with their six-year-old son in their New York City home.

But Ms. Cash is still coping with the deaths of three parents: stepmother June Carter Cash, in May 2003; mother Vivian Liberto Cash Distin, in May 2005; and, in between, father Johnny Cash, in September 2003. Their deaths, and her struggle to understand their meaning, are the subject of her forthcoming album, "**Black Cadillac**" (Capitol), due Jan. 24.

A gifted artist in her own right -- she's had six No. 1 hits on Billboard's Country-and-Western charts, all of which appear on "The Very Best of Rosanne Cash" (Columbia), issued last month -- Ms. Cash has had to balance her public life and private sorrow since mid-2003, creating art that illuminates people who, in the case of Ms. Carter Cash and Mr. Cash, were iconic figures known to some extent to millions, and in the case of her mother, was all but unknown to those outside her immediate circle of family and friends. At the same time, Ms. Cash continues to confront her grief, which can still rear up unexpected, raw and undiminished.

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Kimberly Butler/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images  
Rosanne Cash

Those two aspects of her life come together on the 13 songs of "Black Cadillac," whose blend of country, folk and brooding rock mitigate and enhance Ms. Cash's lyrics, almost all of which were informed by the specter of death. Among the songs is the quietly urgent title track written in the months before Ms. Carter Cash's passing. Mr. Cash's deteriorating health -- he suffered from a neurodegenerative disease during his latter years -- had brought mortality to the fore in the family's thoughts.

"It was a sort of foreshadowing," she said of the song during our recent telephone conversation. "June wasn't even sick and all my attention was on my dad. We were in constant anxiety over his sickness."

In 2003, Mrs. Carter Cash had surgery to replace a heart valve and Mr. Cash called his daughter to tell her the operation was a success.

"He said it went great, but the next day he called at five in the morning to say she had taken a turn," Ms. Cash recalls. "I flew down -- not that he would've ever asked me to -- and she lasted a week, God bless her. But my dad was broken by losing his mate."

In the song "Black Cadillac," Ms. Cash and producer Bill Bottrell included deep in the mix a Mexican trumpet reminiscent of those in Mr. Cash's hit "Ring of Fire," written by Ms. Carter Cash. It's a subtle wink that reflects the delicate balance between private expression and a willingness to allow listeners to share her thoughts.

"Like Fugitives" is about her mother, who died on Ms. Cash's birthday. "She was a force of nature. Incredibly strong," she says. "Mothering was her life. She made chocolates, sewed, was the president of her garden club and had a wide circle of friends. A beautiful spirit."

Very little of that Vivian Cash comes through in "Walk the Line," the Johnny Cash biopic now in theaters. Ms. Cash's sister Kathy expressed her displeasure, if not disgust, at the portrait of their mother as a weak, demanding shrew, but Rosanne is more benign.

"My mother didn't want a public life. She didn't enjoy it. The movie doesn't help," Ms. Cash told me. "I saw it, but I've been avoiding it. There's no reason for me to relive the disintegration of my nuclear family and my father's drug addiction."

"I've had enough written about me that's wrong that I don't believe anything I see or hear about

public people. My 17-year-old said to me, 'Mom, that was a pretty good story.' I let it go at that. Kids put things in perspective, don't they?"

As well as one can, Ms. Cash had been preparing for her father's death -- in 2002, the two recorded a gentle, reflective duet, "September When It Comes," which appears on the new greatest-hits package -- but he was a towering, irreplaceable presence in her life who she considers with great tenderness. Thoughts of her father in pain or distress hurt her still and brought her to the verge of tears during our conversation.

"I took great pride in being a dutiful daughter and doing the things I was supposed to do," she says. "But I look back and think, 'Why didn't I share more when I was younger? Why didn't I let him in? Why was I so difficult?'"

Though her first husband, singer-songwriter Rodney Crowell, had warned her of the power of loss and how it would come at her in unexpected ways, she says she's still surprised at how acutely she misses her father. She recalls riding in a taxi not long ago when "suddenly I had the urge to play this record for my dad," she says of "Black Cadillac." "Then there was this tremendous feeling of loneliness."

As much as "Black Cadillac" is about death, it's about love too, Ms. Cash says. The exquisite ballad "I Was Watching You" portrays her parents as youngsters in love. "I wanted to write a song from outside my own grief, with love and perspective," she says. "They'd both told me, separately, about their honeymoon -- the church, the songs on the radio -- so I let it spring from that."

In the song, she writes, "All these years to prove how much I care/I didn't know it but you were always there/Until September when you slipped away/...Now I hear you say, I'll be watching you from above/'Cause long after life there is love."

She told me, "They were all proud of me. I'm so proud of that. My dad once said, 'Just to think of you makes my heart swell, honey.'"

Ms. Cash is reluctant to call writing and recording "Black Cadillac" a cathartic experience. "I hate to put it in a category like it was therapy," she says, "but I don't know how I would have managed without doing it."

A successful songwriter for more than 20 years, she tried to approach writing the album in a customary, orderly way, writing the lyric and melody at the piano or guitar. But she couldn't.

"The source material was profound, so there was a lot of compulsion in the writing. Some of the songs kept me up at night. I just couldn't sleep. That's not the way I work.

"By the end of it, I was depleted," she says. "I haven't written a thing since."

***Mr. Fusilli, and novelist and critic, writes for the Journal on rock and pop music.***

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